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SPOKEN SPANISH IN THE UNIVERSITY

The great war, having profoundly affected almost everything else, seems likely also to exert an influence upon modern language teaching. This, apparently, is not to be limited to a stimulation of interest in this or that language, but bids fair to concern itself with methods and emphasis rather than with subject matter. President Butler has been the one, perhaps, to point out most conspicuously this phase of the matter :

Intelligent youths who have spent three, four, and five years on the study of one or both of these languages can neither speak them easily nor understand them readily nor write them correctly. . . . It is a sorry commentary as to what is going on in our secondary schools and colleges in this respect to learn on the best authority that there are now in France at least 200,000 American young men who, after six months of military activity in France and three or four hours of instruction a week in the French language can carry on a comfortable conversation under ordinary conditions and circumstances with the mastery of a vocabulary of at least a thousand words. On the other hand, many an American college graduate who has studied French for years is as awkward and as nonplussed in a Paris drawing-room as he would be in the driver's seat of an airplane.¹

Now certain obvious comments might be made upon this, but its general thesis is one which language teachers, however reluctantly, will frankly and honestly accept. It is a fact that most students of foreign languages in this country are unable, after two or three years of study, to express themselves decently in the language they have studied or to comprehend adequately the usual speech of those to whom that tongue is native. This fact has long been admitted by sincere teachers, and constitutes the chief weapon of those who deprecate the amount of emphasis, slight as this is, which has been given to the languages. The legitimate explanations of the circumstance, also, have already been set forth. Lack of time, over-crowded classrooms, insufficiently prepared teachers without foreign residence, incompetent native teachers, varying opinions as to the objects and purposes of language study, etc., all these have become familiar.

Now, however, that the traditional isolation of this country from international affairs seems to be definitely at an end and the fields of

¹ Nicholas Murray Butler, in the *Educational Review*, January, 1919.

commerce and diplomacy alike are beginning to make manifest their demands and necessities, it is becoming apparent that we who teach languages, if we are not to fail in our duty, must teach our students to speak the language we "profess" or admit that we are incapable of doing so. The plea that our purpose is to do, not this, but something else, will no longer be accepted. The present writer will confine himself to Spanish, which is his own field, but the situation is the same for the other modern languages.

If we may assume that a speaking knowledge of modern foreign languages has become or is soon to become of sufficient importance that institutions of higher education will make a serious effort to impart it, in how far is it possible to teach students of college age to speak a foreign language in two years, without infringing upon the other just demands of a crowded curriculum? The writer will resist the temptation to describe ideal conditions, impossible of realization in any reasonably near future, and confine himself, if he may be pardoned for so doing, to what is being attempted in his own institution.

In the first place, and as the merest preparation for attacking the problem, all the teaching members of the department who are to be concerned with the teaching of the language, as distinct from the literature, must, obviously, speak the language themselves, readily and well, and all classes for the first two years must meet five times a week. Further, we must reconcile ourselves to teaching, during the first two years, the language only, leaving the study of Spain's great literature for those students who proceed in the subject beyond the second year. Still further, every department which possesses more than two teachers should number among them at least one native Spaniard.¹

Being equipped to this extent, the way to begin is to begin at the beginning. In many departmental schedules one will find perhaps a course in conversation, disguised, very likely, under some other name and open, under restrictions, to advanced students, while in the classes of the first two years, which contain at the very least seventy-five per cent of the students, the spoken language is all but unheard. The theory is, of course, that the pupils must acquire by reading a considerable vocabulary before they can begin to speak. This theory is fun-

¹ That classes should be limited to a number smaller than twenty-five is highly desirable but probably not possible.

damentally unsound. The person who is already experienced in the language can indeed greatly strengthen and increase his vocabulary by wide reading; the beginner cannot acquire a *spoken* vocabulary in that way. On the contrary, the instructor should begin to speak Spanish to his class the first day, choosing his words, of course, and making perfectly sure that he is understood by everyone. This work requires a certain personal ingenuity and must be judiciously limited in amount.

At this point it is perhaps wise to say that the writer would be quite as rigid in his insistence that the facts of grammar be accurately learned as the most reactionary follower of classical methodology. Without them the student of college age will flounder endlessly in a sea of inaccuracies dotted here and there with set phrases acquired by rote. The grammatical material should be presented and discussed in English, as a saving of time and for the added reason that it does not furnish a subject which the student may be expected to make a very enthusiastic effort to discuss in Spanish. The point involved is that grammar is not, for our present purpose, an end in itself but a means.

Let the instructor never neglect his few minutes of conversation in Spanish with his class, and let him choose the subjects for this from among those most personal to his students and most intimately connected with their every-day life. The dance given the night before by the "Pi Alfs" is a much more stimulating topic of conversation than the mythical adventures of Juan and María as somewhat tediously set forth in the reader. It is astonishing how rapidly students will assimilate Spanish terms for the things that really interest them. It is in this matter of interest that we fail perhaps most often. When the point is reached where the class can be involved in a discussion among themselves, a good bit of the journey, so far as *morale* is concerned, has been accomplished. If the instructor has the blessed gift of humor his task is made the easier. A spontaneous joke told in Spanish which the class catches is not without effect in dispelling the impression of unreality which so often clings to a foreign language in the students' minds. The personal dignity of the instructor will be so entirely a matter of course that he may say what he likes to his class without fear of compromising it. This matter of classroom conversation is difficult only at first, and for that reason should be attacked early. Once started it grows surprisingly easier with every passing month.

All the common agencies for imparting language instruction, with the exception of grammar, should be made to contribute directly to the end desired, without for that reason losing any of the other valuable qualities that inhere in them. The students will begin early in their course to read simple Spanish prose, which will gradually increase in difficulty as they progress until it becomes the ordinary drama or novel of the present day (however reluctantly, we must leave the classics severely alone in these two years). Now one of the most futile things in all education is the requirement that classes which have conscientiously prepared (by translation) a certain number of pages of a Spanish text should spend the precious fifty minutes of the recitation period in repeating this translation aloud, to the boredom of their teacher and of each other. This practice of translating line after line and page after page is either a matter of habit, or it is the facile refuge of the teacher without initiative or resource. This does not mean that translation is useless or that it has no place in the kind of work under consideration. Merely this—that every time one asks a student to translate a passage he should have a definite object in view. Either the passage itself is difficult, presenting idioms and turns of expression foreign to English modes of speech and not easy to render, or the instructor cherishes a suspicion that a given student has a tendency to take advantage of the situation to neglect his preparation, or some equally cogent reason exists for the exercise. The bulk of the classroom reading should certainly be done in Spanish, and it should be done well from the outset. The natural tendency of the beginner to pronounce the Spanish sentence as a series of words without connection or meaning must be combated vigorously from the start, for once tolerated it quickly becomes established as a habit, when it is very difficult to eradicate. Much repetition by the student, together with frequent demonstration by the teacher during the first few class exercises after reading has been begun will tend to establish instead the habit of reading properly. To further this end, as well as to acquire a certain momentum, the reading of the first year should be as simple and at the same time as interesting as possible, and the students should be constantly trained both for accuracy and speed. By “speed” is meant, of course, nothing beyond the natural *tempo* of ordinary speech or reading in any language. The ability to utter Spanish up to this *tempo*, whether in speaking or reading, is

a very great help to the understanding of Spanish so uttered, and the practice of doing so will, to some extent at least, save the student that disheartening experience of helplessness in the presence of native speakers of the language which has been so often commented upon.

"Composition," or more properly in the beginning, translation from English into Spanish, should without doubt be prepared in writing, but it should for the most part be presented orally in the classroom, without reference to the written copies, which the teacher may collect and revise at his leisure. The traditional practice in this respect, that of having the work written (or, still worse, copied) upon the blackboard and thereafter corrected by the instructor for the benefit of the class, is not entirely without value, but does not produce results commensurate with the time spent upon it; certainly not, if it is to be repeated day after day. With the exception of written accents, a possible confusion of *b* and *v* (not likely with American students) and the addition or omission of an occasional *h* (also rare), the student who can speak a sentence correctly can be depended upon to write it. The former is certainly the more difficult as it is the more useful accomplishment.

When we reach the point where real composition begins, that is, when the student begins to express ideas of his own in language original with him, the work should, if possible, be placed in the hands of a native Spaniard, who will seek to impress the rudiments of an acceptable Spanish style upon the written essays of his pupils. It has proven practicable to divide the work of the second year into two classes, called respectively "reading" and "composition," the former meeting three times and the latter twice weekly, the membership of the two being the same. Classes may be distributed among instructors, to make the most advantageous use of their several abilities.

Parallel with the work of the second semester of this year may be profitably introduced a class in conversation as such. This class should meet daily, but as practice rather than preparation is the *desideratum*, it should be regarded as somewhat in the nature of a laboratory course, and should not carry to exceed three hours credit.

The objection is anticipated that this program requires the student to devote an undue amount of time to the subject under consideration. Measuring the college course in terms of semester hours, the language which it is desired that the student shall learn to speak will have consumed 23 out of a total of 120 hours. It is not

thought that the result can be accomplished with less. Nor is it fair or reasonable to expect that it should be. The student who wishes to acquire an adequate grasp of any of the subjects usually taught in universities will hardly expect to do so in less time than this. It is perhaps on this point that criticism of the results of modern language teaching has been somewhat unfair. Does the student who has studied, let us say chemistry, for two semesters really know anything about chemistry in any practical or professional sense? Is he in a position to make use of that science in the field of industry or can he appear with credit in an assemblage of chemists? Hardly so. Our institutions of higher learning are filled with dabblers, and whether they dabble in chemistry or in Spanish makes little difference. Those who wish to make a serious use of some branch of learning will naturally specialize in it to some extent, and the proportion of the four years' course consumed by the program outlined above (somewhat less than one-fifth) might fairly well be called a minimum.

It should be borne in mind that the by-products of these two years of language study (assuming that we are considering the ability to speak Spanish as the main end in view) are not unworthy ones. The student will have had the benefit of the mental discipline provided by a systematic study of grammar; he will have acquired the ability to read—and to translate if he wishes—anything written in modern Spanish; he will have read a certain number of representative works of a great modern literature; he will be well prepared to study that literature seriously if he wishes to do so; he will be able to write acceptably a language second in utility only to English. He is not, of course, a specialist in Spanish, but he does possess certain attainments in that language that are of a positive value. If he cannot give a reasonably good account of himself in the presence of a Spaniard who knows no English, either he is hopelessly dull or his teachers have proved themselves incompetent. By the phrase "to give a reasonably good account of himself" is meant that he can actually converse in Spanish on ordinary subjects, not with perfect fluency nor with absolute accuracy of construction at all times, but sufficiently well to make himself perfectly understood, and that he in turn shall understand whatever is said to him. This much can be accomplished in two years.

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